

BRAZIL 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including incidents involving anti-Semitism and intolerance toward members of Africa-based religious groups. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom and interfaith understanding among Christians, Muslims, Jews, and members of other religious groups.

The U.S. embassy and consulates actively engaged with civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate interfaith dialogue and promote religious tolerance. Outreach efforts included meetings with religious leaders and participation in interfaith events.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2010 census, the population is 190.7 million. An estimated 64.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 22 percent is Protestant. Approximately 60 percent of Protestants belong to Pentecostal churches, 18 percent belong to traditional Protestant churches, and 22 percent to other Protestant groups. Other Christian groups constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Other groups constituting less than 1 percent each include African and syncretic religious groups such as Candomble and Umbanda, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. There is a small number of adherents of indigenous religious beliefs.

There are different assessments of the number of Muslims. According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil considers the number to be about 1.5 million. Other observers estimate there are approximately 400,000-500,000 Muslims. There are significant Muslim communities in the cities of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro,

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Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu, as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, Sao Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro.

According to the Jewish Confederation of Brazil, there are more than 125,000 Jews, 65,000 of whom reside in Sao Paulo State and 40,000 in Rio de Janeiro State. Many other cities have smaller Jewish communities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law provides penalties of up to five years in prison for crimes of religious intolerance. Courts may fine or imprison for two to five years anyone who displays, distributes, or broadcasts religiously intolerant material. It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell literature that promotes religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism.

The Racial Equality Act provides for the right to practice religions of African origin. By law, members of religions of African origin must have access to religious professionals in hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.

There are no registration requirements for religious groups. Religious groups are free to establish places of worship, train clergy, and proselytize. There is a general provision for access to religious services and counsel in all civil and military establishments. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion.

Public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but neither the constitution nor legislation defines the parameters. Religious instruction is optional for students. Each school defines the religious curriculum, usually in agreement with parent councils. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools that religious organizations operate.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national or regional holidays: Saint Sebastian's Day (regional), Carnaval, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Corpus Christi, Saint John's Day (regional), Saint George's Day (regional), Our Lady of Carmen (regional), Assumption (regional), Our Lady Aparecida, All Souls' Day, Evangelicals' Day (regional), the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (regional), and Christmas.

Government Practices

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There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

On January 15, President Dilma Rousseff approved an agreement to include the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and other Jewish-related subjects, as well as racism, xenophobia, and intolerance, in the curricula of some schools, universities, and other educational institutions. On August 17, following a trip by directors of five Brazilian schools named after Anne Frank, the Brazilian Jewish community announced plans to establish an educational network in which participating schools would teach tolerance according to methods the Amsterdam-based Anne Frank House educational institute developed.

On January 29, President Rousseff joined several Jewish and non-Jewish officials at a Holocaust Remembrance ceremony in Salvador to commemorate both Jewish victims and those of black African ancestry. She characterized “remembering” as a way to build the mechanisms to prevent the Holocaust from happening again, noted that the Holocaust would always stand as a paradigm against intolerance, and asserted that democratic societies had the power to fight such crimes as the Holocaust.

In July representatives of Latin America's Jewish and Arab communities met at the foreign ministry to discuss how Latin American Jews and Arabs coexist side by side harmoniously and how to export this idea of coexistence to the Middle East.

On August 5, the defense minister inaugurated a Star of David sculpture at the Monument to the Brazilian soldiers of World War II in Rio as a tribute to Jewish Brazilian soldiers who fought against Nazi fascism.

In September a judge ordered Google to remove from Brazilian YouTube versions of an amateur video many viewed as insulting to Muslims and that had sparked deadly riots across the Middle East. The ruling came in response to a National Union of Islamic Entities suit.

In Sao Paulo, municipal employees are permitted to request official time off for Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and during Ramadan.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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There were few reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In late August a Manaus city councilman published on his personal blog a photo montage of a Jewish politician's face on the body of Adolf Hitler wearing a Nazi uniform. Despite the councilman's claim that it was a "bad joke," the Israeli Committee of the Amazon, an organization of Jewish communities of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, asserted that comparing Jews to Hitler and the Nazis was anti-Semitic and offensive. The Jewish politician filed suit in the electoral court and won, but did not press civil or criminal charges.

Adherents of Umbanda and Candomble reported discrimination based on religious belief. A Rio de Janeiro police officer, who heads Rio's office for investigating crimes of religious intolerance, estimated that Umbanda and Candomble followers were victims of 97 percent of religious intolerance crimes.

On June 17, during the UN Summit on Sustainable Development, an estimated 2,000 Brazilians including Jews, homosexuals, Afro-Latin Americans, and human right activists protested the presence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. One of the signs in English read "Religious intolerance is not acceptable." Earlier, representatives of the Brazilian Jewish community organization, the Israeli Confederation of Brazil (CONIB), urged President Rousseff not to meet with Ahmadinejad because of his repeated denials of the Holocaust, among other reasons.

There was no formal national interfaith movement; however, there were many interfaith efforts, such as Abraham's Path Initiative, an international, interfaith UN-endorsed NGO. Abraham's Path sponsored annual "friendship runs" that brought Jews, Christians, and Muslims together in an effort to increase understanding; over 4,500 persons participated in Sao Paulo.

The Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance in Rio de Janeiro, in partnership with Rio de Janeiro State University, brought together diverse religious and nonreligious groups, including Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Spiritualists, and atheists. On September 16, the commission organized the 5th Annual Walk for the Defense of Religious Freedom held in Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro. At the event, various leaders spoke about the importance of religious freedom. In July an estimated 335,000 evangelical Christians participated in the 20th annual

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“March for Jesus” in Sao Paulo. This was the largest of many similar evangelical Christian events that took place.

The National Commission for Religious Dialogue, created in 1981 by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, continued to bring together Christian and Jewish groups. The Catholic Church’s Sao Paulo’s House of Reconciliation hosted monthly meetings with the Jewish community as part of the commission’s work. During the year, the House of Reconciliation initiated religious dialogues with other religions, such as Islam and Candomble.

Ecumenical movements and organizations, such as the National Council of Christian Churches, continued to bring together Catholics and Protestants. The Group of Ecumenical Reflection and Interreligious Dialogue also promoted ecumenical dialogue between different church denominations at the national and regional levels. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, and the Council for World Mission convened an ecumenical conference in Guarulhos from September 29 through October 5.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with many local religious leaders, continued to support the growing interfaith dialogue, and supported organizations involved in the interfaith movement, such as Abraham’s Path Initiative.

In November the U.S. special representative to Muslim communities met with Muslim religious leaders in Sao Paulo and Foz de Iguacu and with students of Middle Eastern studies in Brasilia. She discussed the Hours Against Hate Initiative and opportunities for Muslim youth to promote religious tolerance through programs such as Generation Change.

In April the ambassador hosted an interfaith reception, including Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim leaders, to launch the Brazilian chapter of Generation Change, a Muslim youth-led global network to promote free exchange of ideas across borders and cultures. Subsequently, Catholic and Jewish leaders launched a similar Generation Change-inspired, youth-led initiative to integrate young people from the three religions into one group. In July, six youth leaders from Generation Change Brazil traveled to the United States as participants in a U.S. government program. They met with Muslim and interfaith groups, with American members of Generation Change, and with the Interfaith Alliance to discuss promoting tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

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The U.S. embassy and consulates sponsored two U.S.-based Muslim leaders' visit to Sao Paulo and Foz do Iguacu to promote interfaith understanding. In meetings with local sheikhs and with Muslim audiences, they discussed U.S. and Brazilian experiences with religious pluralism and tolerance, and ways to promote interfaith cooperation.

In August the Sao Paulo consulate general hosted an iftar for members of the Muslim and interfaith communities. Consulate representatives participated in the September interfaith "Walk for Peace" that Abraham's Path Initiative organized.

A Recife consulate representative attended a ceremony in November marking the beginning of "Forum Dialogos," a new Pernambuco state initiative intended to foster interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and respect for freedom of religion. Many religious leaders participated in the event, including those representing Catholicism, Judaism, Anglicanism, Buddhism, Islam, spiritualism, Hare Krishnas, Tenrikyo, Candomble, and Jurema.

The principal officer in Rio de Janeiro met with the archbishop of Rio de Janeiro to discuss preparations for the 2013 World Catholic Youth Day.